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ABSTRACT

The need for Islamic schools in the United States is growing with the increasing flow of Muslim immigrants. Increasing public school problems lead many Muslim parents to seek private education. Islamic schools are based on religion, though Islam is both a religion and a way of life. The ultimate goal of these schools is to produce graduates who are rich in knowledge, noble in character, and able to promote righteousness in society. Islamic schools include religious, sociocultural, and academic education. The Muslim Academy of Central Florida (MACF) serves K-8 students, providing a meeting ground for Muslim students from diverse cultures. Its curriculum is based on the teachings of the Quran. The curriculum includes Arabic language, Islamic studies, prayers, and all secular subjects. The MACF enables students to fulfill the Islamic goals of personal development, social competence, and continued learning. The school's purpose is to reform the total personality of the student, and to produce students who can accept Islam as a way of life, even outside the Muslim environment. Students learn to be better U.S. citizens. After 6 years of operation, the school is underenrolled because so many students continue to attend non-Muslim schools. (Contains 11 references.) (SM)

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Faith: The Key to Successful Education

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Islamic schools have become the common trend in the United States of America since the 1980s. These are daily schools, different than other Islamic schools like the week-end Sunday schools or evening schools as they seek to be an alternative to public or private secular schools. Today, they are estimated to be more than 100 full-time Islamic Schools in the United States which offer the American traditional curriculum (math, English, science, social studies), in addition, to the Islamic Studies, Quran, and Arabic language.

The Muslim Community that endorses full-time Muslim schools hopes that these schools will provide a healthy atmosphere where the coming Muslim American generation can be nurtured in an environment devoid of prejudices, misinformation about Islam, and negative social pressures. In sum, they see the roles of these schools as a nesting ground for a balanced community (Molook, 1990, p. 133).

The need of Islamic schools is becoming more and more common with the flow of immigrants from the Muslim countries. During the 1950s, Muslims migrated mostly to earn higher education and return to their homeland. Lately, more and more immigrants have chosen the United States as their country of citizenship. This resulted in a shift from student life to establishing families and finding work. During the 1960s and 1970s the children of these families were provided religious education at week-end schools in the mosques.

The fast increasing problems of public schools, namely drugs, violence, and poor discipline has forced parents to look for other choices in education. Thus, parents' dissatisfaction with public schools has prompted a growing number of people to seek alternative forms of schooling for their children, including private, parochial, or home schooling (ElKhaldy, 1996). Muslims in the United States are representatives of a variety of different cultures and ethnic backgrounds.

They come from countries like Pakistan, India, Trinidad, Malaysia, and many other Middle-Eastern countries like Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, Palestine, Egypt, and Syria. The number of Muslims in the United States is now estimated to be 6 million.

Muslims are people from around the world who believe in the religion Islam. Islam is not a religion that was invented by Prophet Muhammad, as it says in the Quran (holy book of Muslims) "Say: We believe in Allah and that which was revealed to us and that which was revealed to Abraham and Ishmael and Isaac and Jacob and the tribes and that which was given to Moses and Jesus and to the Prophets from their Lord; we make no distinction between any of them, and to Him we submit" (Quran 3:83).

Islam is not just a religion but it is a way of life. As Suzanne Haneef (1985) writes, "The meaning of the word Islam is submission and peace." In the course of making an individual Muslim, adds Haneef, Islam profoundly affects his thinking and behavior. In other words, a Muslim is one who freely and willingly accepts the supreme power of God and strives to organize his life in total accordance with the teachings of the supreme being. The Islamic faith includes belief in Allah, His angels, His books which were revealed to Prophets David, Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad, life after death, and the Divine Decree (predestination).

Islam in the general sense is defined as submission to God, and in the specific sense, is the final statement of God's guidance to mankind revealed through the Prophet Muhammad. The religion of Islam has five obligatory acts of worship namely, Shahadah or the declaration of faith; Salaat or prayer; Zakat or poor-due; Sawm or fasting; and Hajj or pilgrimage to Mecca.

1. Declaration of Faith: This constitutes the first step in accepting Islam and is to bear witness that there is no deity except God and that Mohammed is the last Messenger of

God.

2. Prayer: A Muslim has to offer five prayers daily throughout certain times of the day at dawn, midday, mid afternoon, sunset, and at night.

3. Poor-due: This is obligatory on every Muslim where he/she has to pay annually 2.5% of the total savings.

4. Fasting: During the month of Ramadan, all Muslims (except young children, those in ill health) are required to abstain from drink, food, and sexual activity from dawn to sunset. The purpose of fasting is to train oneself in self-control and develop high moral character.

5. Pilgrimage: Hajj or pilgrimage to Mecca is performed once in a lifetime only when one can afford it financially and physically. Muslims from all over the world unite under the banner of Islam and demonstrate equality, unity, diversity, tolerance, and brotherhood.

Like most other religious schools, Islamic schools are based on religious education. Religious education is not something new to schooling in America, it has been there since the first schools started. It may be difficult for many to imagine that the teaching of religion was required by law in early America. The first teachers were pastors and the first schools were in churches. The first textbook was the Bible (Howard, 1990). Thus, religion from the Pilgrims to the civil rights struggle is an important part of American history, civics, literature, art, music, poetry, and politics (Murchison, 1994).

In his book, Inside American Education: The Decline, the Deception, the Dogmas, Thomas Sowell (1993) argues how American schools are turning out students who are not only intellectually incompetent but also morally confused, emotionally alienated, and socially maladjusted. According to Sowell, "a variety of courses and programs, under an even wider

variety of names, have been set up in schools across the country to change the values, behaviors, and beliefs of American youngsters from what they have been taught by their families, their churches, or the social groups in which they have grown up" (p. 34).

Rabbi Steven Carr Reuben (1992) also emphasizes the importance of religious education in schools. "To me," writes Reuben, "religion is a broad category that includes the striving to make sense out of the difficult moments of life and the struggle to pass on values that will move the world closer to our collected dreams" (p. 13). Most Jews, like Christians and Muslims strongly believe that religion should be part of the school curriculum. They want to provide their children with an education that will lead to a Jewish identification and commitment and to lead a life based on Jewish values and knowledge (ElKhaldy, 1996). In the United States there are approximately 60 full-time Jewish schools and many more Christian schools.

Since Islam is also a way of life, more emphasis is laid on Islamic Schools that can reinforce the Islamic etiquettes of life. A Muslim's culture is largely based on the principles of Islam, for example, dress code or dietary needs have to be within the guidelines of Islam. Today, in the United States there are 6 million Muslims and more and more Muslims have begun to realize the great need of full-time Islamic Schools to preserve their future generations from losing their Muslim identity in the "melting pot".

The immigration of Muslims to the United States can be traced back to the early nineteenth century. Haddad and Lummis (1987) in their book, Islamic Values in the United States, divide the Muslim movement into the following five periods:

*1875-1912: Muslim immigrants from Arabic-speaking countries of Palestine, Syria, Jordan, etc.

*1918-1938: Immigrants mainly of relatives, friends and acquaintances of earlier arrivals.

*1947-1960: After World War II , Muslims from the Middle East and South Asia, Eastern Europe, Central Asia, and other parts of the Muslim world.

*1969-Today: The largest Muslim immigrant movement consisting largely of highly educated professionals from India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and other Middle Eastern countries.

The importance of education in Islam is clearly defined from the first revelation sent to Prophet Muhammad to seek knowledge. "Proclaim! (Read!) In the name of thy Lord and Cherisher, Who created. Created man, out of a mere clot of blood: Read: And thy Lord is most Bountiful . . . He who taught (The use of the Pen . . . Taught man that which he knew not (Quran, 96:1-5). Thus, the philosophy of Islamic education is, writes ElKhaldy (1996), primarily concerned with fulfilling the duty of acquainting the individual with Allah and Islam to direct his/her behavior to the laws of Allah.

Islamic schools therefore should endeavor to facilitate students to acquire different aspects of knowledge within the parameters of Islam. The ultimate goal of Islamic schools should be to produce graduates who are not only rich in knowledge but who are noble in character and who can promote righteousness in the society. In the words of Saliba and Tomah (1957), "the general characteristics of Islamic education, however, is that it is neither purely religious, as was the case with the Israelites, nor purely secular, as was the case with the Roman, but both at the same time. Many verses are to be found in the Quran and in the Sunnah (example of the prophet) which indicates that education aims at the realization of happiness in this and the next world and according to a tradition of the Prophet, "the best among you are not those who neglect this world for the other, or the other world for this. He is the one who works for both together" (p. 69).

Islamic curriculum thus encompasses the total person, (cognitive, psychological, physical,

social, and spiritual) and maintains an accurate balance between the secular or worldly knowledge and the religious knowledge. In the words of Farhan (1989), "The Muslim should learn what is useful to him as an individual living in this society and as a person who expects to save his soul in the next life" (p. 35).

Islamic schools, like most other religious schools rise out of the following three principles: Religious Education, Socio-cultural Education, and Academic Education. The Muslim Academy of Central Florida (MACF), the first Islamic School in Orlando, Florida, was opened in 1991 based largely on the need for religious education more than the socio-cultural or academic needs of the 6000 plus members of the Muslim communities. The emphasis was more on religion as a way of life, as religion was being taught to children in the already existing Sunday and evening schools held in the Mosque (place of worship). This aspect, a way of life, made Islamic education even more challenging because an Islamic School has to strive to raise a generation of Muslims in an un-Islamic society, whose values and moral behaviors are often perceived to be in direct opposition to Islamic beliefs. This was more like sailing against the tide to not only inculcate the teachings of Islam but to fight against social and anti-moral pressures of the existing, majority society.

The school's curriculum is based on the teachings of the Quran, the most important and reliable source for many fields of knowledge. Unlike other schools, where the goals and objectives of education change from time to time, Islamic education remains the same. As explained by Haneef, "Regardless of how much time may pass and to what extent, the habits and living patterns of people may change, the principles of Islam . . . may not be altered 'modernized', 'reformed', or in any way made comfortable to the desires of the people since they come from the

Lord of the people, not for their pleasure or convenience, but for their permanent well being and utmost good (p. 86).

The Muslim Academy of Central Florida (MACF) in its first year book (1991) describes its philosophy as follows:

"The fundamental concept of the philosophy of MACF is Islamic education which is primarily concerned with fulfilling the duty of acquainting the individual with Allah and Islam in order to enable him to adjust his conduct according to the teaching of Islam and fulfill the needs and goals of the Muslim Ummah (Community) and mankind as a whole. MACF shall provide a system of continuous educational programs which will guide the students as he or she grows physically, socially, and morally as well as academically. In adopting the philosophy of Islamic education, MACF will endeavor to help the students acquire different aspects of knowledge within the parameters of Islam. The ultimate goal of MACF will be to graduate AL-Insan As Salah (the righteous) and Al Musleh (who calls and promotes righteousness).

MACF shall attempt to develop the individual to think for himself in an orderly and efficient manner, to have a mind open to different ideas, to recognize his worth as an individual and his obligation to respect the rights of others. MACF shall endeavor to include the community in the program by utilizing community resources with the hope of gaining mutual respect and support. MACF hopes to enable its students to fulfill the following Islamic goals more effectively:

GOAL 1: PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

To provide students with learning opportunities which will help them direct their thinking and adjust their conduct according to their faith in Allah, in Muhammad as the Messenger of Allah, and in Islam as the complete way of life designed by Allah for the happiness of humanity, in

order that students may become Al-Insan As Saleh (a righteous) and Musleh (who calls and promotes righteousness).

GOAL 2: SOCIAL COMPETENCE

To help the students recognize that the Muslim Society is an integrated unit where mutual support is distinctive among all Muslims as well as love and brotherhood. Such recognition will help the students to develop a sense of belonging to the Muslim Ummah and to contribute to the development of their society whose progress and strength will positively affect the Muslim Ummah.

GOAL 3: CONTINUED LEARNING

To provide the students with learning opportunities, to foster their enthusiasm for continuing personal, intellectual, and social development that will be in harmony with the teaching of Islam.

In summary, like most Islamic Schools, MACF's goal was to promote Islamic education in the children along with secular knowledge, as knowledge without faith is incomplete knowledge. The Muslim Academy strives to provide excellence in academic education, preservance of Islamic identity through the knowledge and practice of Islamic education, and certainly the study of religion from the Quran (holy book) and the Sunnah (teachings of Prophet Muhammad). In promoting multicultural education, the Academy strives to bridge the gap between the minority Muslim Community and the larger society. This was done through student exchange visitations to different public and private schools, having guest speakers, seminars, and workshops to promote

an understanding of the Muslim culture and to accept the diversity of all people.

The history of Muslim Academy actually dates back to the 1980s when some Muslims in the Orlando area were planning to have a full-time Islamic school. Regular Sunday classes for children were in existence in every Mosque, and by 1990, a few mothers, also teachers at the Sunday School, decided to open an evening four day school to meet the community's needs. This they felt would be economical and manageable, as the children attended the regular private and public schools and continued in the evenings for religious education.

Yet, there were some families who strongly believed in Islam as a way of life, and felt that the evening school was not sufficient in meeting a larger need, thus continued to work on a full-time Islamic School. In 1991, the Muslim Academy, a full-time Islamic School, was opened in portable buildings adjacent to one of the mosques in Orlando, Florida. The school currently is serving students only through the 8th grade. Initially the school opened as a K-10 school because parents who wanted the school had children at these levels. However, the leaders of the school quickly realized that the high school grades were too difficult to serve with high standards and quality teaching.

Consequently, by limiting the grades to K-8, the school can provide a firm foundation in Islam and can meet the state mandated curriculum requirements and does not have to provide the highly specialized and expensive programs typically offered in grades 9-12, such as biology, chemistry, computer science, advanced placement courses in mathematics, English, history, foreign languages and vocational programs for non-college bound students.

The low academics, poor discipline, violence, and drugs in public schools have made the need of private or parochial schools more pressing than before. At an ever increasing rate parents

Muslims or non-Muslims are turning with hope to private schools as an alternative to public schools. The June 1997 issue of the Orlando Sentinel (a local newspaper), public poll rated Orange County Public Schools as a C or below grade. Muslim parents realized that the fast demoralization of schools was producing citizens very contrary to the Islamic belief. Islam as a religion, strongly emphasizes in producing productive citizens that are high in moral character because the students of today are really the future that holds tomorrow's society.

With this spirit the Muslim Academy of Central Florida was opened through the professional guidance provided by Dr. Marcella Kysilka, professor at the University of Central Florida. Dr. Kysilka through her years of educational experience had seen the flow of Muslim immigrants who were going through the rough cultural challenges of a very different culture than their homeland. Dr. Kysilka, a strong proponent of multicultural education, motivated her Muslim student Dr. Yasmeen Qadri to build an institution that could facilitate the bridging of the gap between the two different cultures, namely the Western and the Islamic. Through her professional guidance and inspiration and through the efforts and financial support of four board members the school came into existence.

Since its conception, the Muslim Academy of Central Florida is striving to meet the professional standards of education in the United States. Like most private, religious-based schools, the Muslim School faces the challenges of financial constraints. The Muslim Academy of Central Florida (MACF) had to go through the many pains of birth and growth. The most challenging aspect of the school was the support for funds. Although most Muslims believed in the need of Islamic education, few were willing to make the monetary commitments. For a majority of families the idea of utilizing free public school education and providing religious

education during the evenings was most convenient and economical. The founders of MACF felt that the community will not hesitate to accept the progress from Sunday and evening Islamic education to promoting full-time Islamic education. Instead, the community now had choice to choose the school that would best meet their needs.

The curriculum at MACF consists of Arabic language, Islamic Studies, daily afternoon prayers, and all other secular subjects like science, math, social studies, and English. "The school is based on Islamic philosophy and the goal of the school is to create an Islamic personality within the individual . . . Such a personality conforms with the Islamic teaching which in many respects resemble the teachings of Judaism and Christianity . . . Moses, Jesus, Muhammad, and all the other Prophets (peace be on them all), are referred to in the Quran as Muslims, that is, those who submit to God" (Qadri 1994, p. 48-49)

The purpose of Islamic education at the school is not just to teach about Islam, but to reform a total personality. As Haneef emphasizes, "Islam is not a mere belief system nor a 'religion' in the commonly understood sense of the word. Rather, it is what in Arabic is called a deen, a total frame of reference, a complete system and way of life which embraces the entirety of man's existence" (p. 83). Thus, MACF's goal is to produce students who can accept Islam as a way of life and continue to practice its values and morals even outside the Muslim environment (Qadri, p. 50).

The second large challenging aspect was uniting of the very diverse Muslim cultures under one unified banner of the religion of Islam. The Muslim population of Central Florida is very diverse in its ethnic make-up. Muslim student body is representative of countries from the Middle East, Asia, India, Pakistan, West Indies, Trinidad, Bangladesh, Iran, and Philippines. Although

the religion was common for all Muslims, they largely varied in the ethnicity, food, clothing, and language. To unite the Muslims around the world (some were very strong in their cultural heritage) in one institution was a great challenge and especially with reference to who will be in control?

The School Board, in spite of its very sincere and dedicated volunteers, lacked expertise from the educational arena. They did not recognize the importance of having a common belief and purpose of those placed in decision-making roles in the school. There was a continuous struggle as to whether the School Board controlling power was in the Pakistani/Indian hands or the Arab? Initially, the school administrative personnel had representatives from both the majority cultures. This was not a wise administrative structure as it was losing the purpose of having an Islamic School, that of promoting unity in diversity. The philosophy of education and the interpretation of such principles as discipline were interpreted from the cultural aspect rather than the religious. Thus, students, parents, and teachers could play one "cultural" decision against another. This led to frequent misunderstandings, inconsistent "actions"and "revolving" policies. Although the school was never in chaos, uncertainty and confusion often reigned. Finally, as a result of continuous struggle to maintain high standards of morals and academic education, in 1996 the school took one unified shape.

The greatest advantage of opening such a school was to promote the spirit of patriotism in these immigrant children born in America, who unlike their parents, would be living as American Muslims and not Pakistanis, Indians, or Arabs. The Muslim Academy is unique in the sense that it is not a Muslim school in isolation. Since one of its goals is to prepare the Muslim children to be better citizens of the United States they cannot grow in a vacuum. They have to learn the inter-

cultural skills and learn to link themselves as responsible citizens of their new country. Hence, unlike other Islamic Schools, MACF has non-Muslim Americans on the teaching staff and the School Advisory Committee. The Islamic Studies and Arabic language teachers are required to be Muslims while other secular subjects are taught by non-Muslims. This arrangement, although greatly resisted by some Muslim families, has helped in developing understanding and tolerance of diversity and helped in bridging the gap between the majority non-Muslim culture and the minority Muslim culture.

The school's challenging task is to raise a new generation of American-Muslims, unlike their immigrant predecessors who differentiate themselves on the basis of ethnicity. In order to achieve unity in diversity, students are reminded that Islam is not based on ethnicity but on righteousness as the external differences are the signs of God's wonderful creation.

In addition to the values of diversity, patience, self-respect, honesty, and modesty, the curriculum at MACF is geared towards the teachings of self discipline. This is taught through daily afternoon prayers, dietary habits, dress, and in fasting during Ramadan. Also, every student as a member of the community is required to contribute what ever he or she is capable of for the good of the society (Qadri, p. 51).

This structure also opened a new channel for providing multicultural education and training for per-service and in-service teachers. Multiculturalism is not new to Islam, as the Quran propagates equality and fairness among all: "And among His signs is the creation of the Heavens and Earth and the variations in your languages and your colors. Indeed, in that are signs for those who know (30:22). O mankind, We created you from a single male and female, and made you into nations and tribes that you may know each other. Verily, the most honored of you

before God is the most righteous of you. And God is Knower, Aware " (49:13). Thus, MACF students are trained to value multiculturalism as the "word of God and a virtue and not a unit of study or as Cultural Celebrations. Every Muslim has to strive to accomplish this goal for his inner self and as a social necessity" (Qadri, 29).

As a result, the Muslim Academy became a research center for other businesses and educational institutions. The school not only served the minority groups in providing religious education but also extending its resources to the non-Muslim community. The University of Central Florida has been working in collaboration to develop opportunities for its students, teachers, and in-service teachers to become acquainted with a growing minority culture in the masses of Central Florida. The majority of MACF's staff are graduates of UCF.

In the initial stages the school lacked certified professionals, as most teachers had their degrees from their respective countries. Gradually efforts were redirected and refocussed, as more and more teachers were accepted with teaching experience and education from the United States. These teachers, mostly pre-service teachers were provided financial assistance by the Muslim Academy to work for certification.

Inspite of the continuous struggle to achieve excellence in education and to make the school progress, within the sixth year of the school the number of students is only seventy five. Although there was a ninety percent increase in enrollment from the first year of the school, a vast number of Muslim children continue to go to non-Muslim Schools. As Ali (1984) states: "Ironically, although the influence of public schooling is seen as an increasingly dysfunctional element in Muslim society, efforts to introduce an Islamic alternative have hardly corrected the situation. Muslim educators are small groups of professional neophytes who find themselves

faced with the ominous task of constructing the foundations of a Muslim school system in a country that has no clear Islamic heritage" (p. 130).

Under the leadership of Dr. Yasmeen Qadri (student of Dr. Kysilka and one of the founders of MACF) the school became recognized in the larger non-Muslim Community. MACF students were involved in youth leadership conferences hosted by the National Council of Christians and Jews; Catholic Social Services; and visited other public and private schools. Also, the school presented at several state and international conferences on teacher education and multicultural education. In order to meet the professional standards of education the school administrators are involved in continuous professional interaction with other private and public schools. attend most workshops and seek educational expertise from a variety of people. To ensure the quality of education, the School Advisory Committee visits the school for teacher observations and assessment of teaching strategies, curriculum, lessons plans, and assessment techniques.

Thus, MACF provides a meeting ground for diverse cultures, a unique situation where religious knowledge is given and cultural identity preserved. It is an institution that promotes the complete personality development with high self-esteem and good morals. Finally, a school is built where students can be proud of their religion and heritage and yet develop the spirit of patriotism to be productive US citizens. Muslim students do not have to go through the pressures of being in an hostile environment and continuously struggle to maintain their Muslim identity. Like other parochial schools, Muslims in Orlando have a school that can produce educated and well-mannered students, thus helping the gigantic task of the educational institutions, that of producing a literate and productive society.

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